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# THE CHURCHES AND THE BODY OF CHRIST

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THE YOUNG FRIENDS MOVEMENT
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THE relation of the community of Christ to religious societies, institutions and organizations is one of the constant problems of Christians. It has a peculiar poignancy in our time when the desire for community is so strong among men. This desire manifests itself in the first place as a searching and hungering for intimate, warm and reliable companionship. Everywhere men are seeking what they call security, but which is often identifiable as the sense of belonging, of being wholly accepted, supported and valued by a fellowship, which, moreover, directs them to significant work.

Many reasons may be given for the appearance in our time of this search for community. Among them one may name the depersonalization that is characteristic of a technological and industrial civilization; the growth of the cities and the breakdown of large family units; the loss of intimate relation with the soil and the life of nature; the high mobility and rootlessness of a population that changes residence not only in consequence of wars and oppressions but of the attraction of better wages and living conditions; the substitution of external relations for internal ones. In the language of sociology, we tend to live today in societies rather than in communities. Societies are combinations of individuals which do not profoundly modify the internal character and sense of self-

hood that individuals possess; they are contract associations which men form and join for the sake of achieving limited common ends and which they can leave or dissolve without leaving a part of themselves behind. Communities, on the other hand, are far more intimate in their interactions. Communities exist in the individual as individuals exist in them. A community is warm and personal—a union of whole lives rather than of the fractional interests of individuals. A business partnership is an example of society; the family is the primary instance of community. It is community, not society that men are seeking in our time; of society they have their fill; but for community they hunger and thirst.

A second, widely recognized aspect of this modern search is the desire for *universal* community. Men seek the security of close friendship, the intimacy of family life; but they also want inclusiveness and breadth in their common life. Their desire for community is for world community, for universal friendship. The realization of the unity of all the tribes and nations of mankind, of all the groups with their various histories and hopes, arises before the eyes of our generation as a possibility and as a goal zealously to be sought. Conversely, we experience the division of men as tragedy and as threat. Strangely enough the threat to our existence does not arise from our division only

but from division mated with the demand for unity. If we were content to be divided into many groups, co-existing with each other without interpenetration there would be no threat. But we must have one community, we believe. In part, doubtless, the strife of ideologies and nations that is characteristic of our day is just another chapter in the story of imperialism. But something else is present besides the tendency of every human group to universalize itself. The great mass movements of the past century and a half derive much of their meaning and appeal from their effort to meet the human demand for universal community.

There is a third aspect to this searching for community. We are experiencing our isolation and our division not only as a separation of man from man, human group from human group, but as an alienation of man from his world. Man feels himself alone in an empty or inimical world over which chance or blind will presides. He has no sense of being at home under the sky and upon the good earth; the earth is not his mother and there is no father in the heavens. Orphaned, anxious and alone he finds himself with his fellows wandering through time on paths that lead to no home. Yet he is filled with a great nostalgia and envies with a certain wistfulness those generations that believed themselves to be living in a Father's house or, at least, to be engaged in a pilgrimage that led

daily nearer to the quiet hearth at the center of the world.

Whether we are most aware in this quest for community of the longing for familiar security or of the hope for universal peace or of the desire for a revelation of love at the heart of things, yet we know that all these things are tied together and that there is a religious element in all our seeking. The quest for community is not only always religious, it is expressed in the specifically religious movements of our time. One of these movements is the movement toward Christian faith on the part of thousands of men in our world who have no traditional or acknowledged relation to any of the churches or other groups called Christian or by some other religious name. Feeling themselves isolated and spiritually starved in our secular civilization they seek a community that has a wide view of this mysterious scene of human existence, a sense of at-homeness in it despite its mystery, a feeling for and an understanding of its tragedy, a sense also of reconciliation to life and to all the members of the community of life. The church rises before their view as the community they seek. Yet such men often cannot reconcile themselves to any of the established Christian organizations. These seem to them to be lacking either the intimacy or the breadth of the community towards which they aspire. So they continue to look

upon them from a distance with a strange mixture of yearning and of contempt.

The problem of the church-community is no less keenly felt by many, perhaps by most, of those who are regarded as faithful members of the established and recognized Christian societies or as devout participants in the habitual, institutional practices of the Christian religion. They may regard the expressions of belief characteristic of these societies with much scepticism; or they may bewail the lack of genuine love among the members of the group. Whatever their reasons and whatever the rationalizations of their true, yet often unknown, reasons, they have not found in the Christian societies to which they belong the community they seek. They are often lovers of the church, and yet do not love the church to which they belong, which they see and hear. This brittle relation of man to the Christian societies seems widespread; it is to be encountered in Roman Catholicism and in Protestantism; in the minority sects as well as in the mass churches. The line between the unchurched lovers of the church and the churchly seekers after a church beyond the churches is often difficult to define.

The quest for the church as a community broad, intimate and deep is expressed today also in the ecumenical movement. This movement, to be sure, has many sources as well as many expressions. It is not easily defined as a

single movement though the term is most usually associated with the effort to organize councils and federations of Christian societies that will associate in common action groups otherwise divided by national and denominational barriers. This unity of organization is sought in part in order that the various Christian groups may present a more effective resistance or challenge to secularizing and anti-religious powers. But organization is also the sign and instrument of a sense of oneness between men of various countries and historical religious divisions who have hitherto lacked visible and effective means of communication and of participation in each others' thoughts, hopes, purposes and faith. The organizational phase of the movement is by no means necessarily its most important part. There is an ecumenical movement in our schools and in our culture as a whole. In our various Christian societies we are studying the thoughts of the intellectual leaders of other groups as we have not done since the days of the Reformation. Protestants read Augustine and Thomas Aquinas; Roman Catholics study Luther and Barth; some Methodists immerse themselves in the thoughts of Luther; Dissenters pay new homage to Anglicans. In the sphere of action we make use of each others' special gifts and organizations. When the Church of the Brethren undertakes to send heifers, sheep, seeds and poultry to devastated regions, it acts

for and with the support of Christians who had previously scarcely known of its existence. The Service Committee of the Society of Friends becomes the agency of a far wider fellowship than that of the Society itself. In all of this we express our desire for a church beyond the churches, for a community of Christ, distinct from but not unrelated to the societies of national and denominational churches, associations and sects.

## II

Urgent as these various movements toward the realization of a Christian community now are, it is erroneous to think of them as peculiarly modern. We say today that we seek such a community because industrial civilization has replaced our family sense of belonging together in one bundle of life by the external ties of contract, or substituted for the indissoluble covenant relationship in which we committed ourselves to each other completely the looser, ever dissolving relationships of common interests. But in other eras men also sought a church beyond the churches though they gave different reasons for their dissatisfaction with the societies with which they were allied. When the Society of Friends was founded in the 17th century its authors protested against the established church and the sects of that time with the use

of other phrases than those we now employ, yet they also were alienated from the visible institutions and organizations; they also sought a community in which they might realize their hopes of intense fellowship with one another, with God and Christ in the Spirit. The Reformation was a search for the church beyond the churches. Though its central concern was with the authority of the Scriptures and with the experience of justification by faith through the personal apprehension of the Gospel yet it also aspired after a Christian "Gemeinde" in Luther's term, a Christian common life which the religious institution and the monastic societies of the day did not provide. The search after the church beyond the churches, after a community of Christ beyond all the Christian societies, is noticeably present in all the reform movements within Christendom since the beginning of the faith. It is present in the Franciscan movement, in the many reforms of the monastic life, in Augustinian aspiration after the City of God, in Paul's controversy with the Judaizers and in the efforts of the Hellenists in Jerusalem to provide for better care of their widows and orphans. The story of the old people of God, Israel, is no less a story of hunger and search after a Zion different from all the old and new Jerusalems of history.

Not only in the great movements of history but in all the personal stories of individuals in

societies this drama of alienation from the societies of Christ or of God and of quest after a "city that has foundations" has been re-enacted. Of how many individuals must it not be said that they have been in and out of the church over and over again during their life-times? They have read themselves out and read themselves back in without giving any public notice of the fact. And these alienations and reunions of theirs have been guided to no small extent one may believe by their desire for genuine community in Christ, for communion with other men which would at the same time be reconciliation and friendship with the author and determiner of their existence. The quest for the church beyond the churches, for a society of friends and a brotherhood beyond all existing societies and fraternities has been an enduring quest of Christians throughout all their generations.

It seems to be more than a Christian movement—this aspiration after the City of God. When the Stoic called the world his fatherland and affirmed "Nothing is foreign to me that is not foreign to thee, O Zeus"; when the Chinese asserted that all men are brothers, they were giving utterance to a recognizably similar hope and desire. It is through Jesus Christ that the meaning of man's aspirations, the true direction of his spirit, has been brought most clearly to consciousness. It is through him that the



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reconciliation of man with man is most clearly realized to be dependent on his reconciliation with God; it is through him, also, that the road of repentance and faith has been opened. He begins, not by his teaching so much as by his appearance and his destiny, a new era in the story of man's hope for and quest for community. Yet the gospel of Christ is a gospel for the world precisely because it is addressed to all those who hunger and thirst after this goodness. The community of Christ which is the object of the Christian's hope is something more than the community of those who say "Lord, Lord" to him. It is the community of brothers through the mediation of the Son of God; it is community in the Spirit that proceeds from the Father and the Son, and therefore is a community that transcends all historical Christian societies.

## III

The dissatisfaction that we feel with all our religious societies, our churches, sects, and institutions; the aspiration in men after a community that transcends all these can easily be idealized in undue fashion. When we think of these things we may be led astray into a self-pitying and self-congratulatory romanticism. We are tempted in Rousseauistic spirit to place the blame for all human failure to achieve ulti-

mate community on the established institutions and perhaps on men who are thought to be using these institutions for narrow, personal or class ends. And with this analysis of the situation we often combine a hortatory idealism, persuading men to try and try again to achieve an ideal that through all the ages of the past they have been unable to realize. This way of dealing with the problem of the relationship of the community of Christ to the Christian societies is highly dubious.

Such idealism, attending to the aspirations of men after fraternity, like those after liberty and equality, hardly recognizes the fact that much of the dissatisfaction with the institutions and societies arises not out of the conflict of the expansive movements of the human spirit with the narrowness of institutions but out of the warfare of the private interests of the individual with the more universal concerns of the social bodies. Conflict arises not only because churches are nationalistic, historically relative and class-related, because they are under the dominance of official clergy and of narrowly defined creeds while individuals seek for a church beyond the churches. It arises also because each individual tends to desire a community centered around himself and his own particular needs, not necessarily in a selfish but nevertheless in a particularistic sense, while the churches and societies represent a wider circle of in-

terests and convictions. Just as the ethics of institutions are in many respects more stable and more inclusive than the ethics of individuals, so also the principles of community maintained by the historical societies are frequently more tenable, less subject to emotional prejudice and partiality of insight than those of their dissatisfied members.

The individualistically or historically inspired movements of reform in which the search for a church beyond the churches has expressed itself offer us many examples of the advantage that the established societies have over the dissenters. One group of examples is offered by the aspiration after One, Holy and Catholic church. By and large the great Christian societies have sought, though in an evidently confused, imperfect and sinful manner, to hold fast to all three principles. The community they seek to represent, must have all three of these characteristics of unity, integrity, and universality. How difficult it is to maintain all three, the story of the protests shows. Dissatisfaction with the churches has expressed itself in the demand for unity at the expense of holiness and universality. The churches, many dissenters have said, lack that love, that warmth of personal concern of member for member that must characterize true community. If they were but more loving we could love them, but as it is we must seek a church beyond the churches, some inti-

mate brotherhood, some cell, in which each of us feels himself surrounded and maintained by the devoted concern of his brothers. But that demand has often been associated with neglect of the principle of universality, so that now our Christian world is full of little family groups, "Familists" that claim to be the church in their achievement of unity, but which in their exclusiveness have rejected the principle of universality. More frequently the dissenters have taken issue with the churches' lack of holiness. In all ages they have called attention to the great difference between the practices and the professions of Christians in their societies. Ignoring the fact that this is every man's problem, that conflict between principles and desires is rarely if ever resolved in favor of principle all the time by any individual, the seekers after a holy community beyond the unholy churches have tended to incarnate their ideal community by means of Puritan, Holiness movements that resulted in the exclusion from their new "ideal" churches of the more conspicuous sinners among men. Yet again the universalists among the seekers for a church beyond the churches have been moved to found societies in which the particular principles of Christian holiness and of the love of Christ have been dissolved in vague tolerationism and humanitarianism. It is a melancholy fact that the division of the churches which we bewail in our search for the

community of Christ has resulted to a very large extent from efforts to found the one true community that should take the place of existing, defective Christian societies. In the name of unity or of holiness or of universality each particular organization has set itself up as representing better than all others the true community. In the name of unity, we disunite; in the name of holiness we reject wholeness and deny reverence to what God has made clean; in the name of universality we have become and continue to become particularists. It is easy to call attention to this fault; it is difficult if not impossible to eradicate it. We always see the mote in the institutional eye and fail to see the plank in the personal eye: we find our own ideas so reasonable, our own language so intelligible, that we cannot but try to make ourselves with our ideas the centers of the universe.

Another set of examples may be taken from the quest after human community with God. We cannot be at one with one another unless we are at one with the common cause, the common source, the common and overarching reality on which we all depend. We seek community with the One beyond the many as we seek our oneness with each other in church and world. Now the great institutions of Christendom have directed us to a communion with the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, One God, world without end. Dissent has often

found this statement and the practices connected with it coldly intellectual and sterilely formal. No doubt they often are so. But the dissent itself has tended to substitute for communion with this One, known in nature and in history and in inner experience together, the communion with one known only in nature, or with the one known only in history, or with the one known only in inner experience. Naturalism and Deism, Christomonism and Jesus worship, spiritualism and mysticism have each seen themselves as alone representing true communion with God. So quest for a church beyond the churches has resulted in the development of practices of communion with God that have been inaccessible to other large groups of men. Once more the consequence has been the multiplication of new societies, new cults and rites, good doubtless in themselves or good for some but not means of grace to many others.

The kind of idealism which thinks so highly and so onesidedly of the inspirations of the individual and of dissenters in their groups, has tended to think badly of institutions and of established societies in general. Now the sobriety which comes from self-knowledge and the knowledge of history must qualify all such judgments. It does not lead us to idealize the existing societies, as though they were indeed incarnations of the community of Christ; on the contrary it also knows the pretentiousness

and falsity of such claims. But at the same time it clearly sees that individuals do not excel the societies but that the same infections of pride, self-sufficiency, partiality, and all the attendant host of evils, are present in them quite as much as in societies. On the other hand this sober view recognizes values in the societies that no individuals in themselves, no matter how saintly, can possess.

## IV

The situation in which we find ourselves in modern Christendom seems, then, to be something like this. We are deeply aware of our need for one, holy, universal community, in which we shall have fellowship with each other in our communion with God and in which our faith in God will appear in our loyalty to one another. We are highly aware of the artificiality of our divisions from each other in denominations, national churches and all the other societies of Christendom. We recognize also that all our efforts to achieve unity by means of new organizations, of Christian "defense communities," of federations and councils do not satisfy our need for life in a community of spirit. Yet we are aware at the same time of the healthful and necessary part the denominations, federations and all the other societal organizations of Christendom play in rescuing us from our individual isolations, in checking our efforts to

make ourselves or our parties the centers of community, in mediating the great tradition of the community of men in Christ with God. We see that the societies stand in an ambivalent relationship to the community. On the one hand they are its deniers, on the other hand its representatives.

What can we do in this situation? What form shall our quest for the church beyond the churches take? Doubtless it will continue to issue in endeavors to achieve unions and federations of the denominations and other societies, yet we are well aware that all such efforts can only lead to new organizations in which the old ambivalent pattern of denial and affirmation of the One, Holy Catholic church will be expressed. Doubtless, also, the quest for the church beyond the churches will continue to take the form of an eschatological hope; we shall endure our divisions, and our dissatisfactions and disillusionments with the societies while we await the emergence of true community in an event that is not wholly continuous with present historical development. We shall say, "The realization of the one church, the community of the spirit, is one of those things that is impossible for men, but with God all things are possible." So in patience we shall wait for the coming of the great church and for the coming into our own lives of the unity of faith and the bond of peace.

Yet we can do something more than to wait in patience and to make our ever frustrated efforts to organize new societies more inclusive, or more unified, or more holy than those we see around us and to which we belong. We can realize the actuality of the church beyond the churches, of the community of Christ that is more than the sum of all the societies and that is something different in kind from these societies. In the realization of the actuality of that community we can so use our membership in the Christian societies and can so qualify the activities of these societies that they shall increasingly become servants of the community and members of it.

The community of Christ is more actual, more present, less merely future, more powerful in our lives than we usually realize. When we call it a spiritual reality we are likely to be misunderstood as meaning that it is not real but that it exists only in the minds of men. But the communities that exist in the minds, in the personalities and in the interpersonal relations of men, are often more real and powerful than the visible societies. The community of a nation, the network of interpersonal relations, of common loyalties, of memories and hopes, is a spiritual reality that is distinctly different from though related to, the social structure of states, governments, laws, political parties, etc. These are only instruments of the national spiritual

community. To a much greater extent there is a community of Christ which is a common spiritual life, a common life of persons who are united to each other, to past and future by internal ties. There is a spiritual unity between Protestant and Roman Catholic Christians that can never be adequately defined in any formula of words stating a common creed, or can ever be adequately realized in action through the organization of inter-confessional societies for the achievement of common goals. We can only point to the reality of that community by referring to the common picture of the world and of history, of the common reliance on the government of God, of the common memory of Christ and the common hope of salvation. As soon as we try to formulate the common idea precisely we come into conflict; as soon as we endeavor to form some new society that will include both Protestants and Catholics we find ourselves involved in a power struggle, or in contention about the authority of various human organizations. What is true of Protestants and Catholics is true of all the other divisions in Christendom. There is a community of Christ and in Christ that is actual and that exerts its power over the minds and wills and emotions of us all. The societies are its instruments and partial expressions but no more than that. It is prior to them in power as well as in value.

Insofar as we consciously recognize the re-

ality of this community in which we live, we begin to qualify the actions and claims of our various societies and begin, perhaps, to make them better instruments of the community. We no longer speak of our societies as the church but as agencies or orders of the church. We no longer consider ourselves, as individuals, to be members of the church by virtue of our membership in the societies but only by virtue of our belonging to Christ; we know that our membership in that body of Christ requires a kind of multiple membership in the societies. So one and the same man may be, as member of the body of Christ, an active participant in the work of many Christian societies, as when he is, let us say, a Methodist, a worker in the Christian Student Movement, a member of the wider fellowship of the Friends, of a city federation of churches, and an active participant in some Catholic-Protestant venture. To realize the actuality of the community is to realize the relative character of the claims any particular society of Christians can make upon us and the necessity of regarding ourselves as related to our societies only because we are related to the community of Christ and not vice versa—related to Christ through our societies.

The most adequate parable of the situation in which we find ourselves is the New Testament parable of the body of Christ. "For just as the body is one and has many members, and

all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ." The parable is misapplied if societies that always have some other head beside Christ call themselves the body of Christ. Every Christian society has in fact some other head besides Christ, be it Paul, Cephas, Apollos, the pope, Luther, Fox, Wesley, or any one of the many other apostles and prophets, or be it the king, the nation, the culture or any one of the other many principles that we associate with Christ. The parable is also misapplied if all the societies together are regarded as the body of Christ without reference to the head who is not in any of the members or in the totality of the members but always distinct from them. But it is an excellent and indispensable parable if the primacy of Christ in God and God in Christ is kept in view, and if we proceed not from the many societies to the one head but from the one head to the many societies.

With the aid of this parable we can understand our Christian societies, our relations as individuals to them and to the head as well as their relations to each other. We see the community of Christ as an actual community in the world, infinitely more complex than any human body, yet something like it. It is like a body in that it is made up of many members intricately interacting in common service, often in tension with each other, serving one another not only

by way of positive help but also by balancing and checking each other. The body of Christ today, the community of Christ in the world, is as "fearfully and wonderfully made" as any of us are individually in our complex psychosomatic structure. Its rule is beyond our control. We cannot construct or reconstruct it. It is there and we are in it. We are in it as individuals and as societies. We are in it as those who need in the infinite activity of the body to operate together in ever new ways; perhaps as those who are being directed by the head to form new organs. But the reality and unity of the body do not depend on our understanding of its structure and on our efforts to supply it with unity or power.

In this faith in the reality of the holy, catholic church, of the community of Christ we can rejoice in the development of the many societies that are parts of its structure, accept our own particular societies with gratitude and without feelings of inferiority or superiority to other societies, accept with gratitude also these other societies with which and sometimes against which we must work, and go about our business of building up the community through the special and limited services we can perform in this our time and place. The church beyond the churches exists now. We know it only in part, to be sure, and for the rest accept it by a faith that does not see, yet is loyal to the unseen.



but does it really exist in the human - is there real unity.

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